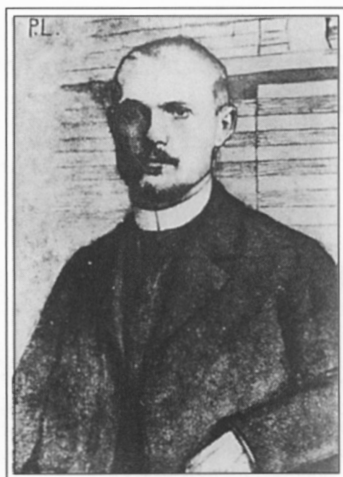




Temporal and Eternal



CHARLES PÉGUY

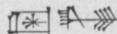


*Temporal
and
Eternal*

CHARLES PÉGUY



Translated by Alexander Dru

Foreword by Pierre Manent

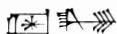


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Foreword

It is difficult for an American reader not only to understand but even to gain access to the thinking of an author like Charles Péguy. We French can say that he was a great poet and a deep critic and thinker. But how can we give an idea of his greatness when nearly everything he wrote about is buried deep in French history, when everything he wrote seems to be essentially linked to an explicitly French perspective? How can we have Charles Péguy rise from the footnotes of scholarly studies of French history, or at most of the “European nation-state”?

The European nation-state is an object of pressing interest for every political animal—that is, for each of us, because it is the political form in which for better or worse we all live. It is indeed a contested and weakening form, but it is still the only real political entity we have. After all, the Soviet Union has reverted to its old national components. The United States is a prodigiously successful nation. And nobody knows whether the European Union, the greatest attempt to officially and decisively overcome the national basis of political life, will succeed gloriously, or collapse ignominiously.

At the time of Péguy’s life, the European nation-states were basking in the sun of overweening glory while teetering on

the brink of ignominy. They were busy building empires; educating the masses; cultivating the arts and sciences on a grand scale; and savoring, in English, French, or German, European man's finest hour. They were also about to enter the hellish cauldron of the First World War, whence all the evils of the century of evil would issue. Péguy died in the first weeks of the war, on the eve of the Battle of the Marne, as he led his platoon for an assault in the open. He was last heard shouting to his men, "For God's sake, push ahead!"

For centuries European peoples had lived a colorful and vibrant but hardly coherent life in the maze of their innumerable religious and secular institutions. For a long time ours was a checkered garment. We at last found the coherence of a common life in the framework of the nation-state, in which all the contents of human life merged. We found unity and community in the unity of our respective nations.

Those political and spiritual mergers were no harmonious pageants, no unanimous ceremonies. They involved forceful, and at times violent, measures. As every nation tried to form itself into the only true mystical body, it had to deal with mighty contenders. It would be a simplification, but perhaps an illuminating one, to say that the two mightiest contenders were, in very different, and even opposite, fashions, the Catholic Church on the one hand and the Jewish people on the other hand: the most visible and the least visible non-national communities in Europe at the time.

The Protestant churches had struck an early peace with the nations of which they were henceforth a part. Only the Catholic Church stuck to its self-understanding of being the *respublica perfecta*, the most and only perfect community.

In France, the conflict between the new nation and the old church took on a classical intensity and clarity. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, after years of tumultuous confrontation, the nation, in the form of the eager and ambitious République, at last won the day and submitted the church to a definitive demotion through promulgating laws rigorously separating church and state. As the conflict between the republic and the church was coming to a head, the Dreyfus Affair broke out. This “immortal affair,” as Péguy called it, was a cause célèbre for the whole world. After Captain Dreyfus, a French officer of the general staff, of Jewish descent, was falsely accused of treason, of having spied for Germany, the whole country was split into two irreconcilable camps, the camp of “Dreyfusards,” composed mainly of republicans, and the camp of “Anti-Dreyfusards,” composed principally of Catholics.

The emancipation of Jews through their integration into secular society and the state had brought about new problems as it solved old ones. Péguy was one of the first and most ardent Dreyfusards. In “Memories of Youth” (1910), he bitterly explains how, faithful to his original commitment and proud of it, he became disillusioned with most of his former companions, who had come to use the order of battle born from the Dreyfus Affair to take on the Catholic Church and submit it to a demeaning, illiberal political domination. In the course of this long, tortured process, Péguy went from being a socialist to becoming a Christian.

Because it generalizes and deepens the political bond, the modern nation-state tends to integrate the Jews and to absorb, or subjugate, the church, which excluded the Jews. But the

official acceptance of the Jews into civil and even civic society is not necessarily synonymous with a true and genuine welcome. The Jews were invisible, or they were nowhere to be seen; now they are visible and thus, to some observers at least, they seem to be everywhere: in many Christian eyes, the modern nation-state, in France the modern République, which was subjugating the church, was but an instrument in the hands of the Jews, who have no nation, who are stateless. Today it is difficult to understand clearly this complex triangular debate in which the Catholics passionately identified themselves with half of the whole, the other half of which they rejected with an equal intensity: they saw themselves at one with this part of the modern nation-state, which they called "France," while they felt repugnance toward the other part, which was for them the "republic and the Jews." In the opposite camp, republicans tended to exclude Catholics from the "true" republic as they conceived it. France became the divided body whose travails paradoxically manifested the strength and the depth of the human longing for unity and wholeness. "To be a Jew," "to be a Frenchman," and "to be a Christian" were not only qualities, or identities, the compatibility of which both camps evaluated differently. They were also claims to the true whole as well as inchoate motions toward it. Thus, for Péguy the Dreyfus Affair was the meeting-point and the culmination of the history of France, the history of the Jewish people, and the history of Christianity. And the first "squad" of Dreyfusards, the only genuine ones, whom he called the "mystical body" of Dreyfusism, precisely embodied in the rarest fashion the three corresponding *mystiques*: the true Republic, the true

Christianity, and the true Israel were at one in their original decision for the innocence of Dreyfus.

To a contemporary reader, and in particular to an American one, what makes Péguy's treatment of the matter puzzling, and even foreign if not outlandish, is that the question of the community, and even of "communion," takes precedence over the question of individual rights. Not that he attributes to the community, religious or political, any rights over or against the rights of individual conscience: on that score, he is as liberal and even as anarchist as one can be. Otherwise, how could he have been among the first to side with the innocence of one man against the authority of the army in which the nation had rested its hopes? But once that juridical question is settled for him, it does not hold his attention. What interests him very much is the question of belonging, the question of the whole, or the wholes, to which we belong. You cannot solve that question through any shrewd adjudication of rights, separation of powers, or distribution of roles; you cannot solve it through theoretical analysis; you can solve it only through practical synthesis, that is, through a deepening of "belonging," a deepening of communion. Through his active participation in the Dreyfus Affair, Péguy deepened his understanding of what it means to be a Frenchman, to be a Jew, to be a Christian. There is no doubt, since he at last privately and publicly declared himself a Christian — refusing, it is true, his adhesion to the dogma of damnation — that he ended considering the Christian, particularly the Catholic, Church as the most complete and accordingly the truest communion. At the same time, he never ceased inveighing

against the official, “bourgeois,” church, never ceased preparing himself for the civic sacrifice as he saw the war coming, and never ceased deepening his personal and spiritual bond with the Jewish people.

If Péguy is susceptible to looking bizarre in our contemporary eyes, it is only because he was much more concrete and real than we ordinarily care to be. We dutifully and mechanically distinguish between private and public, between the individual and the community; and the distinction is valid as far as it goes. But how far does it go? Looking at Péguy’s political and personal journey, we discover a spiritual triangle, the three poles of which are defined by three capital communities: the political or civic community, the Christian Church, and the Jewish people. If, tired of conventional discourse, we made a resolution to “get real,” reading Péguy would be the right starting place.

PIERRE MANENT

Introduction

Although two volumes of Péguy's poetry have been published in English, his prose is only represented at the present time by two short "Selections" translated by Anne and Julian Green. His poetry is in fact much more accessible than his prose, in part because it is not embedded in the political feuds of the period, but also because it is more direct. The repetitions and variations which are tolerable in the form of free verse are not only more eccentric when presented as prose; they tend to increase and multiply and hold up or obscure the argument. And yet it could be maintained that Péguy was greater as a prose writer than as a poet. In any case Péguy's thought cannot be understood as long as his prose is ignored. With this in mind, I have tried to produce a readable version of two *Cahiers* which will form the first of three or four volumes covering the main body of his prose work.

The difficulty in translating Péguy's prose works lies in making them readable and intelligible without dehydrating the text to such an extent that it loses its quality. When M. Mauriac was told by Mr. Julian Green that he was translating *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, his comment was disconcerting. "What a pity," he remarked, "someone does not translate him into French." But no manipulation of the text, how-

ever ingenious, could make Péguy a correct writer. In France the problem has been solved to some extent by the publication of eleven or twelve volumes of *morceaux choisis*, the first of which, *Le Choix de Péguy*, was selected by Péguy himself, who may be presumed to have countenanced the method. This assumes, however, that Péguy's thought had, in the course of time, been assimilated and his ideas disseminated, as his influence spread. As this is not the case in England a different method seems to be called for.

It is largely for this reason that *Men and Saints* and *Basic Verities*, both of which are adroitly selected by Mr. Green, have made little impression. They are eminently readable, always short and self-contained. Inevitably, however, they fall into the genre of *pensées* and do not pretend to convey the characteristic elements of Péguy's work: the movement of his thought and his plodding gait. Without the repetitions and redundancies and the endless variations on a theme Péguy's peculiar method is lost. For these repetitions and the accompanying parenthesis, often more important than the thesis, are not merely a rhetorical device for hammering in home-truths. He can be very concise when he wishes.

"We are living at a period," Ballanche wrote in 1818, "when all ideas must be produced, and all the problems important to man must be expressed, at the same time. The feeling of simultaneity is the cause of the apparent incoherence which has been criticised in the [foregoing] prolegomena."

The problem which Ballanche raises in a rather naïve way is, in some respects, Péguy's. The thoughts which taken in isolation read like *pensées* are, properly speaking, fragments; the fragmentary method of composition so common to many

of the romantic thinkers, such as Hamann, Novalis, Coleridge and Schlegel. It is erected into a principle in Kierkegaard's *Fragments of Philosophy*. Kierkegaard's work is also repetitive and he gloried in the number and elaboration of his parentheses, without bothering about the fact that it often makes him unreadable. But the repetitions serve a purpose, which is to present the "fragments" in a constantly varying and changing pattern. The "simultaneity," as Ballanche calls it, is the obverse of what in other thinkers is "the system": an indirect expression of the "whole" which cannot be expressed directly in a series of interlocking statements, because it cannot be known except fragmentarily, though the fragment must always consciously remain the obverse of the system. In that sense Péguy's method and style echo his conception of philosophy as a voyage of discovery, or, as he also calls it, a "system" of courage, in order to emphasize the central place of the paradox.

Therefore, this abridged translation of *Notre Jeunesse* and of the first version of *Clio* is not an attempt to tidy up his work and bring order into his thought, but rather the opposite; an attempt to preserve the order and emphasize the pattern. But I have, for example, suppressed the long digression on the Jews, with its tribute to Bernard Lazare, his close friend during the Dreyfus Affair, which forms a central part of the *Cahier* but destroys its balance. I have taken the same liberties with *Clio*, and in the second case have substantially curbed Péguy's style. My intention has not been to clip him into a recognized form, but to prune his style in order to reveal the fruit.

The choice of *Notre Jeunesse* and *Clio I* is dictated by the same reasons. There are other *Cahiers*, such as the *Note Con-*

jointe, which might have been translated with hardly any cuts. But there are none which go from a number of points simultaneously to the heart of Péguy's matter: Christianity in the modern world.

Notre Jeunesse was published in July, 1910, six months after *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*. Some time in 1907 Joseph Reinach, one of the leading supporters of Dreyfus, suggested to Péguy that he should write an essay on the Affair. Péguy, who was incapable of writing to order, declined, but mentioned the suggestion to one of his closest friends and collaborators, Daniel Halévy. With Péguy's encouragement, though after a good deal of thought, Halévy agreed to write the history of the Dreyfus Affair and to publish it in the *Cahiers*. He realized that he was liable to offend the susceptibilities of some of his friends, but believed that after ten years or more had elapsed he could afford to treat his subject historically, and with Péguy's help went to work on *Apology for Our Past*. "How is it," he asked in all innocence, "that having felt so pleased with our Dreyfusism, or rather having taken such pride in it, how is it that today it arouses no more than a feeble response in us all?"

The *Apology* was published in the spring of 1910. Three months later Halévy was astonished to receive *Notre Jeunesse*. He had expected some replies, but he did not anticipate that the most violent would come from Péguy, taking him to task for writing in a penitent mood and for depreciating the rôle of Péguy's *Cahiers* during the Affair. From that time on, Halévy stopped attending the Thursday meetings at the offices of the *Cahiers* and only saw Péguy intermittently.

The origin of the first version of *Clio*, which I have called *Clio I* for convenience, in order to distinguish it from the second version, *Clio: Dialogue de l'histoire et de l'âme païenne*, is so far unknown. It was found among Péguy's papers and appeared in 1955 with another unfinished work of little importance under a title which certainly preserves Péguy's tradition of divorcing title from subject: *Deuxième élégie, XXX*. From internal evidence it is clear that it must have been conceived and in part written at the time that *Notre Jeunesse* filled his mind. Not only are the themes the same, but *Clio I* develops many of the ideas which occur for the first and only time in *Notre Jeunesse*. Since 1907 Péguy had been bogged down in a series of *Cahiers* on the place of history in the philosophy of the modern world, of which three were published. Halévy's book got him afloat again and he began *Clio I*. But before he had finished it he was launched on a new series of *Cahiers*, and instead of returning to the first version he entirely rewrote it under the title given above. This second *Clio*, also unfinished, was published shortly after his death.

Péguy's decision, if it was one, not to publish *Clio I* could be accounted for on two grounds. In the first place, it is among the most turgid of his works. And although self-criticism was not his strongest suit, it is very possible that Péguy was anxious not to endanger the success of *Notre Jeunesse* with a more than usually characteristic text. It is also possible that he saw the wisdom of not further antagonizing the Catholics with a violent attack on the clergy at a time when he still hoped that the two sequels to *Joan of Arc*, *The Holy Innocents* and the *Porche*, might establish his reputation as a Catholic writer. Moreover, on reading *Notre Jeunesse*, Barrès had told him, somewhat in-

advisedly, that he ought to aim at the Academy, and Péguy, for the only time in his life, was optimistically grooming himself for success. Finally Bergson was being attacked by the Catholics and, though Péguy was not prepared to abandon Bergson, he was fully alive to the danger of exposing himself to further criticism on that score. His system of courage was for once wedded to prudence.

Many readers of *Notre Jeunesse* must have felt as amazed as Halévy at the violence with which Péguy took up the Dreyfus Affair when it had, at long last, become past history. To treat it as the turning point in the contemporary history of French politics and religion might seem like treating the Tichborne Case as the climax in the history of the British Empire and the spring of a Catholic revival.

Writing thirty years later, Halévy revised his views, and his excellent account of the background of *Notre Jeunesse* agrees at most points with Péguy's interpretation. The forces which Péguy had seen at work, and which his contemporaries could hardly distinguish, had in the meantime matured. He had claimed that the handful of independent supporters of Dreyfus represented by the *Cahiers* were not only in the right, ideally speaking, but that they alone had achieved anything. It could now be seen that this subjective and paradoxical view had in the interval been justified to some extent.

In 1910 it looked as though the Dreyfus Affair had deepened the rift in the French tradition beyond all repair. The conflict between Catholicism and the Republic was more bitter than ever before and even those who did not regard the opposition between the two camps as inevitable despaired of seeing any form of compromise or peace. That struggle had begun during

the Revolution, when the attempt to build a national Church with a Civil Constitution for the clergy had been followed by a determined effort to wipe out Christianity. The excesses of the Revolution paved the way for the restoration of the Church in a propitious atmosphere, until the uncompromisingly clerical measures of 1828 once again created a breach in the nation. The outside observer in Péguy's day, even though not persuaded of any fundamental incompatibility between Catholicism and the Revolution, could foresee no end to the struggle. Belloc, for example, had no solution to offer.

"The attempt to 'de-Christianize' France," he wrote in 1911, "failed, as I have said, completely. Public worship was restored and the Concordat of Napoleon was believed to have settled the relation between Church and State in a permanent fashion. We have lived to see it dissolved (1905), but this generation will not see, nor perhaps the generation succeeding it, the issue of the great struggle between two bodies of thought which are divided by no process of reason, but profoundly divorced by the action of vivid and tragic historical memories."¹

Péguy's analysis of the situation, though it does not entirely contradict Belloc's, is utterly different. Both were agreed that Catholicism and the Revolution were not irreconcilable; but while Belloc attributed the great struggle to a divorce brought about by historical memories, Péguy held that the two bodies of thought had, in the course of time, evolved into ideologies which no longer corresponded to the faiths on which they were originally founded. The struggle had

1. *The French Revolution*. Home University Library, p. 252.